

Andover Newton Theological School
THEO 712: Screening Theology: Theological Reflection In and Through Film

Spring 2011: Tuesdays 2:00-4:50 pm
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Office Hours: (Arranged by Appointment)

Description of Course:

Highlighting the possibility and potential of a relevant theology of culture, this course explores the ways in which recent Hollywood movies can be used as resources to think about and even to think over the meanings of key theological concepts such as ideas of God, human nature, sin, Christ, redemption, and eschatology. Through lectures, reading materials, the viewing of movies, and class discussion, students will be encouraged to consider how an appreciative and critical engagement with popular culture can allow for a relevant and contemporary practical theology.

Working Methodology:

This course will combine a lecture and seminar/dialogical format. It will also include extensive in-class film screening. Usually, during the first half of most class sessions, the course instructor will begin by reflecting on the film viewed in class the previous week. Following a fifteen minute recess, the remainder of each meeting will be devoted to an open discussion focusing on the film and the theme connected to it.

Course Objectives:

It is the hope that upon completion of this course the student will hold:

1. A heightened awareness of the role of cinema and film in contemporary culture.
2. A better understanding of what popular movies have to teach us about theology, and conversely how theology can help us to find further meaning in popular movies.
3. A greater level of awareness of and even sensitivity toward our present-day human condition and sociocultural situation through the interpretation of contemporary popular films.
4. Enhanced skill in evaluating movies and their messages from a theological and ethical perspective.

Main Texts to be Used:

1. Robert Johnston, Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue (Baker Academic, 2000).
2. Margaret Miles, Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies (Beacon, 1996).
3. Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz, editors, Explorations in Theology and Film, (Blackwell, 1997).
4. Chris Seay and Greg Garrett, The Gospel Reloaded: Exploring Spirituality and Faith in the Matrix (Pinon Press, 2003).
5. Greg Garrett, The Gospel According to Hollywood, (Westminster John Knox Press, 2007).
6. Peter Hodgson and Robert King, editors, Christian Theology: An Introduction to Its Traditions and Tasks (Fortress Press, 1994).
7. Timothy Cargal, Hearing a Film, Seeing a Sermon (Westminster John Knox Press, 2007).
8. Other readings will be assigned and made available (*).

Course Requirements:

1. Faithful attendance to class sessions. More than three absences, not occasioned by serious medical reasons or some other life-altering circumstance, eliminates possibility of credit for the course.
2. Students will put together a journal throughout the semester, containing brief two page reflections on the films viewed in class. It is recommended that these reflections be written on the week that proceeds the viewing of a film. These brief reflections will be gathered and turned in at the end of the semester.
3. Students will prepare a final paper of approximately 14-15 double-spaced pages, offering an analysis of a chosen film. This assignment should aim to provide an exegetical summary of the film and a theological exploration of some theme portrayed in the movie. It is also expected that students will weave together insights gleaned from scholarly sources and their own critical and constructive thoughts in the development of these essays. Thus, it can be said that these final papers should look like or have the earmarks of a research *and* a reflective paper. Moreover, students are advised to make use of at least five different scholarly sources in the writing of these essays (e.g. academic theological texts; cultural theory/studies texts, film theory/studies texts, etc., etc.). Other popular sources such as newspaper articles, newspaper reviews, Church magazine articles, among other things, can also be used to complement the scholarly sources employed. Students can run their chosen topics and a possible paper outline by the course professor at any point of the semester for possible advisement, if so desired. *These essays are due on (May 3) for graduating students, and on (May 11) for non-graduating students.*

Students are advised to keep the following detail in mind when writing their essays. While there are subjective components in any grading process, most professors are concerned that you become well educated in four basic qualities of solid academic work:

1. Demonstration of an emphatic understanding of the content of texts and resources.

This means that your essays should not only be well researched or referenced, but also that it should provide a fair description and a clear understanding of the texts and resources used. This is apparent in the ability to describe and discuss precisely and/or accurately what an author has written, what a speaker has said, or what a movie has portrayed.

2. Clear critical thinking that provides appropriate evidence for and assessment of conclusions.

This implies a) that you should use the most adequate material(s) or information to support the claims of your statements; b) that you should check into the logical relationships among your ideas; and c) that you should consider the potential limitations of your ideas and/or those of the authors you engage.

3. Creativity that moves beyond reporting someone else's ideas.

This suggests that you should work to find your own voice and perspective in your writing. Your creative addition to academic discourse might include questioning, evaluating, or criticizing the ideas of others. But it can also include development of your own viewpoint or the viewing of an issue from a unique perspective. The minimal requirement of academic work is correctly reporting what is read or discussed. Excellent work moves beyond repetition of other peoples' ideas to the offering of unique questions, insights, perspectives, or correlations of ideas.

4. Sound grammar, spelling, and form.

Good writing is always conscious of, and indeed a product of, proofreading and appropriate/clear communication. A brilliant idea can be lost in a paper that obscures its ideas with careless writing. Keep this in mind: Your readers and listeners should not have to guess what you mean—help them by writing and speaking well.

As a general rule of thumb, I note that an earned grade of “A” reflects work of exceptional, faultless quality; an earned grade of “A-“ reflects work of superior, almost perfect quality; an earned grade of “B+” reflects work of notable or noteworthy quality; an earned grade of “B” reflects work of solid, sound quality; an earned grade of “B-” reflects work of above average quality; an earned grade of “C+” reflects work of satisfactory quality; an earned grade of “C” reflects work of average quality; and an earned grade of “C-” reflects work of passable quality.

Once more, I remind students that final papers are due on (May 3rd) for graduating seniors and on (May 10th) for all others. And please note that “all” late papers, (all papers not turned in either on the 3rd or the 10th of May), will be devaluated by a full half grade—an “A” paper becomes a “B+” paper, a “B+” paper becomes a “B” paper, etc.,etc.

Weekly Topics and Reading Assignments

- I. (February 1) - Introduction to the course; its topic; and each other.
- II. (February 8) - “Reel Theology: Reflections on the Confluence of Theological Thought, Culture, and Film.”
Readings: Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz, Explorations in Theology and Film, (Chapters 1-3).
Robert Johnston, Reel Spirituality, (Chapters 2-4).
Margaret Miles, Seeing and Believing, (Preface, and Chapter 1).
- III. (February 15) - “Lights, Camera, God-Talk: Thinking About God In and Through Film.”
*****In-Class Screening of *Bruce Almighty* *****
- IV. (February 22) - “Lights, Camera, God-Talk: Thinking About God In and Through Film.”
Readings: Peter Hodgson & Robert King, eds. Christian Theology: An Introduction to Its Traditions and Tasks (Chapter 3).
Gordon Kaufman, In the beginning...Creativity (Prologue).*
Gordon Kaufman, God The Problem (Chapter 3).*
- V. (March 1) - “Escape From Paradise: Theological Anthropology In and Through Film.”
*****In-Class Screening of *The Truman Show* *****
- VI. (March 8) - “Escape From Paradise: Theological Anthropology In and Through Film.”
Readings: Adele Reinhartz, Scripture On The Silver Screen (Intro., and Chapter 1).*
Hodgson and King, Christian Theology, (Chapters 6 and 7)
- VII. (March 15) - “Is This Real or Just a Dream?: Human Estrangement and Faith.”
***** In-Class Screening of *The Matrix (Part I)******
- VIII.(March 22) - “Is This Real or Just a Dream?: Human Estrangement and Faith.”
Readings: Chris Seay and Greg Garret, The Gospel Reloaded, (The Entire Book).

*****No Class on March 29th (Spring Break)*****

IX. (April 5) - “From Jesus to Christ Film: Cinematic Representations of Jesus Christ.”

***** In-Class Screening of *The Last Temptation of Christ******

X. (April 12) - “From Jesus to Christ Film: Cinematic Representations of Jesus Christ.”

Readings: Margaret Miles, Seeing and Believing, (Chapter 2).*

Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz, Explorations in Theology and Film, (Chapter 9).

Hodgson and King, Christian Theology, (Chapter 8).

XI. (April 19) - “Imagining The End: Cinematic Visions of Apocalypse.”

***** In-Class Screening of *Children of Men******

*****No Class on April 26th (Community Day)*****

XII. (May 3) - “Imagining The End: Cinematic Visions of Apocalypse.”

Readings: Paul Hanson, The Dawn of Apocalyptic, (Chapter 2).*

Stephen Cook, The Apocalyptic Literature, (Chapter 1 and 3).*

Gerhard Sauter, What Dare We Hope? (Chapter 1).*

Hodgson and King, Christian Theology, (Chapter 12).

*Final Papers are Due on this Date for Graduating Seniors!

*Final Papers are Due Next Week for all Other Students!

Important Notice: The appearance of an asterisk after an assigned reading in this syllabus means that this particular reading comes from a book that is not one of the appointed main textbooks. These additional sources shall be made available in the library as “reserved reading material.”